

Sarah Iles Johnston Sees Stories Creating Meaning and Beliefs

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SPEAKERS

David Staley, Eva Dale, Sarah Iles Johnston

- S** Sarah Iles Johnston 00:00
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:32
Sarah Iles Johnston is the College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of Religion in the departments of Classics and Comparative Studies. She is the author of numerous books, including *Ancient Greek Divination* and *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*, and as the editor of several volumes on religions of the ancient world. She has been an American Council of Learned Societies fellow and visiting fellow at Princeton University, a senior fellow at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion at the University of Chicago, and a senior fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Johnston.
- S** Sarah Iles Johnston 01:09
Thank you, David.
- D** David Staley 01:11
Your most recent book is titled *The Story of Myth*, and you suggest that defining "myth" proves to be a challenge. But I wonder if you might nevertheless, venture a definition of myth for us

this morning?

S Sarah Iles Johnston 01:22

Well, here's my working definition. A myth is a story about the deep past of a society. In other words, it's set in the past that is so long ago that the society can imagine things worked differently, and in particular, in what I call myths. Typically, this is a time when entities such as gods and angels and demons more frequently interacted with humans, and those interactions have repercussions for generations of humans yet to come.

D David Staley 01:56

So give us an example then of a myth.

S Sarah Iles Johnston 01:59

Well, one of the most famous myths that comes to us from ancient Greece is the myth of Pandora. That in the beginning, there were only males, and Zeus, the king of the gods becomes angry at those males, because they have stolen fire from heaven. And so to punish them, and to kind of even the score, they have the advantage of fire, but Zeus doesn't want them to get to above themselves. Zeus sends them the first woman, Pandora, and as one of our ancient Greek sources for this myth goes on to say ever since then, the race of men has been cursed by the race of women, and women are necessary if men want children, but women are a continual source of trouble. So that story from the deep past about Zeus becoming angry with males has had this repercussion for all males ever after.

D David Staley 02:49

So is The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit, is that, is that a myth?

S Sarah Iles Johnston 02:54

That's up for contention, and there's a lot of work being done on that right now by scholars. Because, if you look at the way that Tolkien wrote that - and I don't know to what degree he was fully conscious that he was doing this - but he has signals in the text that suggest we are meant to believe it as deep history. And of course, we can stand back and say, well, we know that Lord of the Rings was written at this in this year, and we know that J.R.R. Tolkien was a real man who was a medieval scholar, and this he was doing in his spare time. So we can say, we know this is a work of fiction, but many people who read it genuinely believe that what Tolkien was doing was relating stories that he had access to that other people didn't, and that these are tales out of the deep past of England's history. So whether we want to call that myth or not depends on whom you're asking.

D David Staley 03:52

David Staley 05:32

So tell us the principle arguments or arguments that you make in your book, *The Story of Myth*.

S Sarah Iles Johnston 03:59

What interests me is the capacity of myths and other vivid entrancing tales to change the way that people feel about a variety of things: about ethics, about politics, about religion. A really well created narrative, particularly when it is engagingly narrated or engagingly performed, has the power to cause us to at least temporarily suspend our disbelief and start believing in what the story is saying. And in some cases, permanently suspend our disbelief; in other words, change our beliefs, and any story can do that. I would argue, and here I'm basing what I'm saying again on research that others have done, that *Downton Abbey* made many of us suspend our disbelief, at least during the hour that we were watching these episodes, but even longer we would go to work and we'd talk to each other about oh my gosh, did you see what Lady Mary did, oh my gosh, and so we were really engaging in their lives. And if your society is simultaneously telling you, and this is a fictional example, but let's pretend our society is telling us, well, Lady Mary really exists, and if our religious leaders are telling us that, and our political leaders are telling us that and our parents and our teachers, those stories about Lady Mary become believable to us. So by the same terms, if we are being told vivid, engaging narratives about the goddess Athena, or about the Hindu god Krishna, or about any other supernatural entity, and our culture simultaneously is saying those people really exist, then those narratives create belief. And that's what I was interested in, in my book. And I took in particular Greek myths as my examples, because that's what I'm most familiar with, but the book also explores the capacity of television shows, films, and novels to do this.

D David Staley 06:03

Tell us about the role that myth played, then, in the Greek belief system.

S Sarah Iles Johnston 06:07

Oh, it was immense. The Greeks were the first Western culture to develop really sophisticated ways of presenting stories. They develop the recitation of poetry in very sophisticated and transcend forms, they invented theater and the plays that are presented in theater, etc. They invented a lot of what are now standard literary forms, but they were performing these and the average person would go to these performances, would hear these performances, and 90% of what was being performed were stories of the gods and heroes. So if you are in Athens and you go to the theater and you hear what we now call the play *Oedipus the King*, and then next week, perhaps you go to a performance of what we now call *Book Nine of the Odyssey*, you're hearing about what the gods have done to humans and how the humans have responded to that. And over time, this deepens your belief in those gods.

D David Staley 07:12

You focus in the book, in particular, on Greek heroes and their role both in these myths and in the development of a belief system. What role did heroes play?

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Sarah Iles Johnston 07:21

Heroes are what we might call junior gods for the greats. Heroes were believed to have once been normal humans, but who did something extraordinary during their life so that after they died, they became, perhaps not as powerful as Zeus or Athena or Hermes or Apollo, but powerful, and able to influence the course of life for the humans who were alive at the time. And so humans would pray to these heroes just as they pray to the gods. One thing that interests me in the book is how stories that were told about the heroes, and again, stories that were performed in the theater or recited as very vivid poetic narratives, how those stories about the heroes not only helped to create and sustain belief that the heroes continue to exist after death, but specifically helped to create belief that the heroes still could have a huge influence on human lives. And with the heroes, it's particularly interesting, because, since they had once been normal humans, they were assumed to have a lot of compassion for humans, a lot of empathy for humans. And so you could pray to the goddess Artemis to help you have children, and she might listen, but a lot of people, they would pray first to one of the heroes if they were having trouble having children, for example, because it was assumed the heroes would really know how you felt.

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David Staley 08:48

Were the Greeks exceptional, do we find heroes like that in other cultures?

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Sarah Iles Johnston 08:53

That's a great question. What I argue in my book is that, at least within the Western world, the Greeks were the first. If you look at ancient Mesopotamia, if you look at ancient Egypt, ancient Anatolia, these were cultured-

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David Staley 09:09

So modern-day Turkey, that sort of area?

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Sarah Iles Johnston 09:11

Yeah, exactly. These are cultures that are older than the Greeks, and from what we can tell, they told a lot of stories about their gods, but very few stories about humans and/or even about heroes. There are some exceptions, but very few. It's the Greeks who really come up with this idea that ah, it's wonderful to tell stories about great humans and the Greeks develop these stories into high art forms and those survived to us today. It's why we have things such as the Disney cartoon Hercules, because people are still interested in Heracles.

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David Staley 09:45

So why were humans not the subject of the myths and stories of these earlier peoples, what

explains that?

S Sarah Iles Johnston 09:52

We can only make guesses, but here's a guess that I find particularly convincing: those earlier cultures, of places like Mesopotamia and Egypt, they had monarchies, they had a single human, a king or a Pharaoh, who was in charge of everything. And in fact, these kings and pharaohs were thought to be almost divine themselves. And therefore, you didn't really want to encourage poets to make up stories about other great humans in a monarchy. The Greeks, as we know, were the first to invent what we call democracy, and even before they formally invented democracy, Greek culture was much more democratic in its outlook. And therefore, there was room within the Greek mindset for the idea that even though there were gods, there might also be this plurality of great humans existing out there as well. And so, although there's certainly other factors that went into it, I think that's one of the crucial ones.

D David Staley 10:49

It sounds as if you're drawing a distinction between myths and these other sorts of vivid stories, and a sort of a formal religious structure, is that the case?

S Sarah Iles Johnston 10:58

I don't think we want to draw a very firm division there. And in fact, I think that's been a problem for really the last century in the study of myths. I think we have to understand myths as being on a spectrum or a continuum with other types of stories. And myths is a convenient term for us as 21st century people to use collectively for the stories that the Greeks passed down to us, but for me, myths are side by side with the television shows that we watch, that with the films that we watch. All of these entrancing narratives engage us in a way that potentially changes our mind about what we experience in the world on a daily basis.

D David Staley 11:45

So you've, at a couple points in this interview, used the term vivid stories or engaging stories. Is there a formal definition of what makes a story vivid and engaging?

S Sarah Iles Johnston 11:56

There's a lot of formal definitions, and people who call themselves narratologists spend a lot of time on that. The aspects of vivid narratives that most interested me, and maybe I should backtrack and say, at the beginning of this research, I read a lot of work by narratologists, and I was trying to identify what things that narratologists have found to be effective and modern stories, in other words that make modern stories vivid and engaging, could I also find in ancient Greek myths? And so, here's a couple of them. One is the fact that if you tell a story episodically - in other words, you don't tell it all at once, but you tell, here's a part of it, and then next week, you tell another part - if you tell a story episodically, people become more

engaged because, in between the episodes, they're kind of left on their own to think about, let's go back to Lady Mary as an example, think about Lady Mary, and they talk to their colleagues about Lady Mary. And so their own imaginations, their own minds, are engaging with Lady Mary, and then they see another episode, so that is fed by what Julian Fellowes has come up with in the story of Lady Mary. But as this goes on, Lady Mary becomes very personal to those people who are consuming the narrative because they've been thinking about her on their own. So telling the story episodically is important. Another thing that's important is what narratologists call plural mediality, and plural mediality is kind of a two dollar word for something that we all are very aware of. It means presenting a character in a variety of different media, so Lady Mary's not such a good example, because we only see her in the television show, but a great example is Sherlock Holmes. Almost immediately as soon as Conan Doyle wrote those stories, Holmes was also being presented on the stage, and Holmes was presented in illustrations, etc. And nowadays, of course, we have many Sherlock Holmes. We've had Benedict Cumberbatch, we've had...

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David Staley 14:04

Robert Downey Jr.

S

Sarah Iles Johnston 14:06

That's the name I was groping for, exactly. We've had lots of different Holmes, on TV and the movies, we of course, we're still reading the stories, etc. So, we have a lot of different Sherlock Holmes and any one of us consuming these many different representations, without even knowing it, we're kind of picking and choosing. So I, for example, really like Benedict Cumberbatch, his deeply intellectual portrayal of Holmes. But on the other hand, some of you are too young to know this portrayal, but the portrayal that the BBC had in the 90s with Jeremy Brett, I found him a very effective Holmes, because he had a kind of deep longing look all the time and so he was groping for something. So we take elements from these different pictures of Holmes, and we make them into our own cumulative picture. And it means that my Sherlock Holmes is different from your Sherlock Holmes, and therefore, again, deeply personal and deeply engaging. So Greek myths were told episodically, they were told in plural medial ways, by which I mean the Greeks would hear about Heracles in a tragedy and Heracles in a poetic recitation and nd they will see Heracles in vase paintings and sculptures. So for the Greeks, Heracles became a deeply personal character.

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David Staley 15:26

So you've used the term narratology now, a couple of times, so I wonder if you could give us sort of a definition of what narratology is and what its main features are?

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Sarah Iles Johnston 15:35

Narratology is simply the study of narratives. And here at Ohio State, we're lucky in that respect, we have a lot of scholars of narratology, in fact, outstanding scholars of narratology, many of whom are located in the English department, but not only there. And for years now,

we've had the Project Narrative Consortium, which brings in people who work on narratology from other places. So to get back to your question, as I said, narratology is simply the study of narrative, but it is the study of narrative using all the resources you can possibly bring to bear. So evolutionary psychologists, for example, have recently been making a very convincing argument that one of human's most important evolutionary advantages was the fact that we learned early on in our development how to tell stories, because telling stories enables you to experience things vicariously that you can't or perhaps do not want to experience in your real life. But as you're experiencing them in the story, you are learning survival skills that you can apply to other aspects of your life. And so this is how humans developed into higher intelligence creatures. So narratologists might use that, that they've learned from evolutionary psychologists, they might learn things that they've seen folklorists do when they interview, when folklorists interview people about their experiences, how do people relate an experience in a way that makes it credible? Narratology, essentially, is going out and discovering how can we better understand why narratives affect us so deeply.

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David Staley 17:15

How has narratology affected your work, not just this book, but your work generally?

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Sarah Iles Johnston 17:21

It's affecting my work going forward very significantly. I've had a great love my entire life, on the one hand for Greek myths, but on the other hand for ghost stories.

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David Staley 17:30

Oh, interesting.

S

Sarah Iles Johnston 17:31

And as I've gotten older, I've started to wonder why do I love ghost stories? And it's not just me, of course, why do so many people love ghost stories, some of these stories are terrifying, so why do we keep coming back to, not only some of the older ghost stories like *The Turn of the Screw*, but the new ghost stories, movies like *Hereditary*? What is it that attracts humans to this? So I'm just at the beginning of a project, in which I'm going to use a lot of what I learned about narratological analysis in the process of writing the book on myth, to try to understand, first of all, what makes a ghost story effective? What does the narrator do, typically, in an effective ghost story? Are there figures of speech that typically are used, is there something about the way that the characters are represented? And since I'm just at the beginning, I only have vague ideas about that. But my aim in the long run, which no one has done yet, is to really come up with an analysis of why the ghost story so fascinates so many people. One thing that I can say is that it is an alternative way of exploring many of the questions that, traditionally, religion explores and in our increasingly secular culture, I think ghost stories have come to fill a gap. In a ghost story, at least certain kinds of ghost stories, you are prompted to think about, well, what does happen after death, and is the separation between life and death

really as absolute as we've always believed? Traditionally, for centuries, people went to church or to synagogue or to the mosque or wherever they went for their religious worship to get answers to questions like that. Nowadays, I think people are turning to narratives.

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David Staley 19:20

We've been talking about, well, a whole range, I suppose of engagingly told stories. In television, we've been talking about Sherlock Holmes and Downton Abbey and Lord of the Rings, and I know you make reference to these in your book; is there a modern or contemporary engagingly told story that rises to the level of myth, or is it too soon to make that determination?

S

Sarah Iles Johnston 19:45

I think the closest things are, on the one hand, Lord of the Rings. But the other thing that a lot of research is being done on right now is Harry Potter, and it's been shown that the way that readers - and I don't know if work's been done on the movies so much - but it's been shown that readers of the Harry Potter books, both children and adults, engage with those stories and engage with those characters in the same way that people engage with real people. And I'm not saying that if you were to ask a 12-year old, does Hermione Granger really exist, a 12-year old would say yes. It's not that the 12-year old or for that matter, the 32-year old, can't tell the difference, but Harry Potter is so engaging that it has the potential to influence its consumers attitudes in the same way I think that religious narratives and myths do. And I should add that I've recently been reading work on Harry Potter that shows interestingly enough that although early on, many churches were, were against Harry Potter, in other words, Protestant churches in particular, pastors who are saying children should not be reading this, this is, you know, satanic, this is encouraging all the wrong thoughts in children - nowadays, a lot of Protestant churches are embracing the Harry Potter novels because they realize the values that they are promulgating are in agreement with Christian values, and that this is an alternative way to acquaint children or to supplement children, thinking about what traditional religions want to promote, that you need to be a good person, that you need to care for other people, etc.

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David Staley 21:30

The Chronicles of Narnia?

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Sarah Iles Johnston 21:32

Oh yeah, big time. And there was a book published in 2014 by a social anthropologist named Tanya Luhrmann, it's called When God Talks Back, it's won many awards. What she's interested in, in that book, is how Christian evangelicals train themselves to feel the presence of God, and one of the ways that they train themselves is to read The Chronicles of Narnia and to imagine God in the form of the lion, Aslan, and to do it as vividly as possible. So, they are taught to imagine the way that Aslan's fur feels, the sound of Aslan's voice. And once they have become

really good at doing that, that sort of sensorially rich view of God, then they slowly learn to feel God as a more abstract entity who is nonetheless present. So The Chronicles of Narnia have become a sort of training tool in feeling the presence of God.

D David Staley 22:29

I wanted to read a quote from the end of your book, and to get your reaction. "Until now, the two groups of people who have had the best potential to shed light on this topic, the social scientists and psychologists who have studied the construction of belief, on the one hand, and the humanists who have studied the particular ways in which narrative affects audience, on the other hand, have interacted with each other very little. Here, I have tried to integrate ideas from each of these fields." How did you accomplish that in your book?

S Sarah Iles Johnston 23:02

I had a sabbatical some years ago, and I spent part of it on fellowship at The University of Göttingen in Germany. And I was very lucky because amongst the other people who were at the fellowship institute, well, on the one hand, my Ohio State colleague, Dory Noyes, a folklorist was also on fellowship there. And so Dory and I had the luxury that we don't have in daily life at home to really talk to each other. But also at that fellowship institute was a specialist of modern media named Jason Mittell, who teaches at Middlebury College. And by talking to Jason, I learned a lot about what people who study TV narratives know about why the TV narratives affect us. Some of the stuff like I was saying earlier about Lady Mary. So at lunch, I would talk to Dory who knew about how kind of average daily talking amongst people changes their belief systems, that's what folklorists do, and Dory does it very well. And then I'd turn and I talk to Jason about what people who work on TV know. And so, I had the luxury of spending this time on fellowship, not only thinking further about what I already knew, but talking to Jason and Dory and various other people about what people in their fields do. And by the end of the year, I realized that the work I wanted to do required me to spend more time really reading up in these fields and some other fields. So it was almost like going to the grocery store, I suppose, and saying, gosh, that pomegranate looks good and gee, that chocolate looks good. And you've got a grocery cart full of stuff by the time you're leaving, and you're going, what can I make out of this, this is wonderful stuff. I now need to understand what I can make out of it. And my book is what I've made out of it.

D David Staley 24:54

So tell us what's next on your research horizon.

S Sarah Iles Johnston 24:57

Well, the ghost story book. And the other thing I've decided to do is create a re-narration of Greek myths for adults. And what I mean by that is that, for 75 years, it's exactly 75 years at the moment, Edith Hamilton's book, Greek Mythology, has been basically the go to book if you are an adolescent or an adult who wants to become acquainted with Greek myths. And 75 years ago, that was a fine book, but the language is outdated. Moreover, Hamilton, I think,

made a mistake in pausing in her narrative, and sometimes inserting herself as a scholar and trying to say, well, here's what the story really means. What I want to do now is something like what Neil Gaiman did a couple of years ago for Norse myths, not unfortunately that I'm as skilled as Neil Gaiman at narrative, I'm sure, but he retold Norse myths again, vividly, engagingly, so that an adult could sit down and read these stories and be pulled along and want to read more. So I'm going to give that a shot with Greek myths and see if I can do it.

D David Staley 26:10

It sounds to me like you're doing more than just translating these myths.

S Sarah Iles Johnston 26:14

Oh, yeah. In fact, I'm very deliberately not translating.

D David Staley 26:17

Oh, you're not translating.

S Sarah Iles Johnston 26:18

Because, let's say, the version of a Sophocles or a Homer, those are beautiful. But other people have already done that, Emily Wilson recently has gotten a lot of acclaim for her new translation of *The Odyssey*, which is spectacular. But a lot of people don't have the time to sit down and read the whole *Odyssey*, read the whole *Illiad*, read all of Sophocles plays, and I could go on and on here, right? If you are a more typical adult who wants to know about Greek myths, you want them all within, let's say, a 300 page book. And I will certainly tell the story of *Odysseus*, but I won't tell it in the length that *The Odyssey* does. I'm trying to provide a one stop shopping experience if you want to know Greek myths.

D David Staley 27:06

Sarah Iles Johnston. Thank you.

S Sarah Iles Johnston 27:09

Thank you, David.

E Eva Dale 27:10

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